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SUBJECT The Opium War

PETER JENNINGS: Overseas tonight, we take an unusual look at a war which ultimately affects a large number of Americans. It is the opium war in Asia's so-called Golden Triangle.

Last week, three young American tourists were captured in northern Thailand by an opium warlord's private army. They've now been released and given a letter for President Reagan, reportedly from the warlord himself. In the letter, he offers to cooperate in opium crop substitution.

ABC's Mark Litke has been on special assignment in the Golden Triangle. In this report, he explains just how a flower has launched a battle with very high stakes indeed.

MARK LITKE: In the rugged mountains where Thailand, Burma and Laos meet, the light green patches of opium fields are visible now on hundreds of hillsides. It's another good year for the opium poppies of the Golden Triangle. We found the local hill tribes well along with their seasonal harvest, slitting the mature poppies to get at the sticky sap, then scraping away the raw opium when it's dry. Only a pound or so from each field, but the final harvest should duplicate last year's 600 tons. And if half of that reaches clandestine jungle refineries, as usual, it will yield up to 30 tons of heroin. And U.S. drug agents estimate that up to 1 1/2 tons, with a street value of \$3 billion, could ultimately reach the States.

But this year the Thai government has increased efforts to hamper the flow to the international heroin market. With U.S.-supplied helicopter gunships, Thai troopers have stormed a number of villages that survive off the opium trade. And they're now fighting a small war against the opium warlord who controls

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most of the heroin refining in the region. His name is Kung Sa (?), dubbed by U.S. officials public enemy number one in the international drug trade.

In a week of intense fighting, Thai troops finally dislodged the opium warlord's forces from their main base here in northern Thailand, driving them across the border into jungle sanctuaries in Burma. The Thais confiscated an enormous cache of weapons and claim to have inflicted heavy casualties.

The United States Government, which gives Thailand roughly \$5 million annually for narcotics suppression, has long been critical of Thailand's tolerance of Kung Sa. So the U.S. Ambassador here says the Administration is now delighted with the current crackdown.

MAN: I would say this shows a determination, a boldness, a courage which is to be applauded by everybody. This is progress. There's absolutely no doubt that this is progress. This will have a major effect on the traffickers.

LITKE: In fighting the drug war, Thailand has given \$4 million in aid over the last seven years to the United Nations crop substitution program, which tries to wean hill tribe farmers off opium. To date, however, only 50 out of 400 opium-growing villages have tried other crops. But the program is the pet project of Thailand's powerful king and queen, and not to be taken lightly.

Additional American aid flows through the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, which teaches Thai agents how to stop smuggling at its source. And the DEA is delighted lately with the number of drug offenders in local jails.

But there is a lingering suspicion here that Thai police still take payoffs from major drug traffickers, who stay free, while picking on the easiest targets to inflate statistics, like Australian Bill Harper, arrested for a small amount of marijuana in the province where opium is a thriving business.

BILL HARPER: ...grab anybody. They're not just interested in getting guys that sell lots of dope. Just anybody at all.

LITKE: But whatever their reasons for this year's crackdown, the Thais are now faced with the consequences of their own lax drug policies in the past.

MAN: The narcotics problem is an international problem. It's not only an American problem. It's as much a Western European problem. It's also a Thai problem.

LITKE: Indeed, heroin addiction in Thailand is suddenly rampant. Thai officials estimate 400,000 addicts here now, roughly the same number as the United States, with only one-fifth the population. And this, ultimately, may be the most important motivation Thailand has ever had to win the fight against heroin.